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ABSTRACT

A community outreach program of the Queens College (New York) Linguistics Department is described as an example of the potential for institutional involvement with the community through linguistics. The report outlines the program's origins and early activities, and then describes a period of active program development, from 1983-1986, resulting from a number of grants. The program had three target populations, Spanish-illiterate Hispanics, nonliterate English-speaking adults, and nonliterate speakers of Haitian Creole; its components include: (1) training for literacy teachers and teachers of English as a second language (ESL), and (2) community literacy/ESL classes. It is noted that a key factor in the program's success has been the active interest of the college administration. Five conclusions about program effectiveness are made that: (1) although clarity about goals is necessary, flexibility is also important; (2) community leaders and students should be involved in all stages of planning and execution; (3) internal institutional support must be assured; (4) resources must be carefully identified and the danger of over-extension must be heeded; and (5) identification with divisive partisan issues must be avoided. (MSE)

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LINGUISTICS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

APPENDIX 4-C

Community Outreach

by

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the LSA or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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PREFACE

The Linguistics in the Undergraduate Curriculum (LUC) project is an effort by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to study the state of undergraduate instruction in linguistics in the United States and Canada and to suggest directions for its future development. It was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during the period 1 January 1985-31 December 1987. The project was carried out under the direction of D. Terence Langendoen, Principal Investigator, and Secretary-Treasurer of the LSA. Mary Niebuhr, Executive Assistant at the LSA office in Washington, DC, was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the project with the assistance of Nicole VandenHeuvel and Dana McDaniel.

Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the LSA Executive Committee in 1985. Its members were: Judith Aissen (University of California, Santa Cruz), Paul Angelis (Southern Illinois University), Victoria Fromkin (University of California, Los Angeles), Frank Heny, Robert Jeffers (Rutgers University), D. Terence Langendoen (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Manjari Ohala (San Jose State University), Ellen Prince (University of Pennsylvania), and Arnold Zwicky (The Ohio State University and Stanford University). The Steering Committee, in turn, received help from a Consultant Panel, whose members were: Ed Battistella (University of Alabama, Birmingham), Byron Bender (University of Hawaii, Manoa), Garland Bills (University of New Mexico), Daniel Brink (Arizona State University), Ronald Butters (Duke University), Charles Cairns (Queens College of CUNY), Jean Casagrande (University of Florida), Nancy Dorian (Bryn Mawr College), Sheila Embleton (York University), Francine Frank (State University of New York, Albany), Robert Freidin (Princeton University), Jean Berko-Gleason (Boston University), Wayne Harbert (Cornell University), Alice Harris (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Heath, Michael Henderson (University of Kansas), Larry Hutchinson (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), Ray Jackendoff (Brandeis University), Robert Johnson (Gallaudet College), Braj Kachru (University of Illinois, Urbana), Charles Kreidler (Georgetown University), William Ladusaw (University of California, Santa Cruz), Ilse Lehiste (The Ohio State University), David Lightfoot (University of Maryland), Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College), Ronald Macaulay (Pitzer College), Geoffrey Pullum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Victor Raskin (Purdue University), Sanford Schane (University of California, San Diego), Carlota Smith (University of Texas, Austin), Roger Shuy (Georgetown University), and Jessica Wirth (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee).

Departments of Linguistics in the United States have an excellent opportunity to become involved in a variety of community affairs in ways that can be beneficial to both the community, the institutions, and the field of Linguistics. In many communities, language related questions are of paramount concern, especially in urban, polyglot settings. Of course, the issues around which departments can organize and the particular method of intervention are sensitive to a number of local factors. The potential for benefit to both the department and the community can be great—new opportunities for research can be made available to the department, the images of the field of linguistics and of the host institution can be made more realistic in the community, interested students can be attracted to the field, and more students can be motivated to become active in social issues. In the remaining few paragraphs, I describe the community oriented activities of the Queens College Department of Linguistics during the period starting in 1982 through the present. These activities have chiefly involved a project designed to train TESOL teachers and teachers of nonliterate adults; accordingly, the details are particular to institutions where such programs are housed largely in Linguistics Departments. Other institutions, especially those with large undergraduate programs, may find involving students in sociolinguistics projects a more congenial type of project. Nevertheless, some lessons can be drawn from our activities which, we hope, others can benefit from. These are drawn together in the final few paragraphs.

Background. Since 1968 the Queens College Linguistics Department has been developing an undergraduate program in TESOL, aimed primarily at preservice training of teachers for the public schools. In recent years we have noticed three major trends to which we have been responding: increasing numbers of our students are interested in teaching adults; more students are representative of the highly diverse linguistic, national and cultural environment of the College; and a growing proportion of the adults attending ESL classes in New York City have primitive or nonexistent literacy skills in their native languages. In response to these trends, we have undertaken some major changes which have involved community outreach in several areas, as described below.

Preliminary activities. Since the summer of 1982, students and faculty have become involved in a broad range of educational and research projects concentrating on the needs of adults who have severe difficulties with reading and writing, of speakers of languages other than English, and, especially, of those who are in both categories. The first phase of these activities was initiated entirely by undergraduate students, who organized free ESL classes for Hispanic adults in Queens. This had a number of beneficial effects: the College's faculty and students became aware of the need for special approaches to the nonliterate/ESL student, initial contacts were forged with community groups, the existence of a strong interest among undergraduates in community education became apparent, the Department won the respect and cooperation of important student groups, and the College administration offered material support. Encouraged by these results, we began a systematic survey of the community needs, interest among community leaders, and our internal resources; these led to a successful proposal to FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education) for funds to carry these plans further.

The period of the FIPSE grant. For the three year period from August 1983 through July 1986, we were fortunate to receive crucial and substantial support from FIPSE, as well as numerous smaller grants from other sources. The planned a new MA degree in Applied Linguistics, workshops and conferences for practicing teachers, a major international conference sponsored by the LSA, and research into important questions in adult literacy and ESL. For a brief period, the Department also had a State sponsored contract to operate professionally staffed classes in literacy and ESL for adults in the neighborhood of the College. These projects had the goals of promoting the development and professionalization of these fields of teaching, of drawing special attention to the needs of those adults who do not speak English and are also unable to read and write in their own language, and of preparing preservice teachers for adults. During the period of the FIPSE grant, the Department was guided in these projects by an Advisory Committee consisting of community leaders and leading practitioners in the field of adult literacy and ESL in New York.

Community needs addressed. Special attention was focussed on two groups of adults. The first is those Hispanic adults who do not read and write in Spanish, and the second consists of English speaking adults of normal intellectual ability whose literacy skills place them in the lowest level of read-

ing ability. A third group consisting of monolingual, nonliterate speakers of Haitian Creole was included during the first phase of operation. The next few paragraphs provide a general description of the linguistic situation in Queens and the reasons for choosing these target populations.

According to the 1980 census, almost thirty percent of the population of Queens County in New York City is foreign born. Allowing for subsequent trends and undercounts, possibly over one third of the County's population speak a language other than English at home. The linguistic diversity is enormous. According to a series of articles in the New York Times a few years ago, there are almost 90 countries represented in Queens, with Spanish speakers comprising about half the nonEnglish speaking population. Queens is by no means unique in the City, State or nation as a polyglot area. Recent articles in the major newsweeklies describe similar situations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and other cities.

The linguistic needs of nonEnglish speaking youngsters are served by ESL programs in the public schools. There are ESL programs available for adults offered by a variety of organizations, such as the Board of Education, CUNY, churches, libraries, unions, community based organizations and for-profit schools. Although many are of high quality, all are overwhelmed by demand and maintain long waiting lists. The general lack of resources for teaching adult ESL is particularly acute for nonEnglish speaking adults who lack basic literacy skills in their own languages. Almost all existing ESL programs assume native language literacy on the part of students, and all existing literacy programs assume that the students speak English. The nonliterate ESL student has almost no place to turn for an effective and professional basic education.

The gap in services described above results in part from the need for considerable sophistication required for building programs to meet the needs of the nonliterate ESL student. Such programs must be staffed by well-trained, bilingual teachers who are particularly knowledgeable about complex linguistic, attitudinal and cultural factors involved in a program designed to educate this category of adult student. Accordingly, it seemed appropriate for a Linguistics Department to undertake a comprehensive program, in conjunction with community leaders and professional educators, to help meet the needs of nonliterate, nonEnglish speaking adults.

Hispanics comprise one focus population for two reasons: One is that there is a substantial need in this population, because many Hispanics in

Queens come from areas with very poor educational facilities. The second reason is the there are large numbers of Hispanic students at the College who have expressed an interest in working with the Department on this project: several of these students have become majors in Linguistics.

The Department also responded to the needs of English speaking adults who lack basic literacy skills. Most existing literacy programs assume a third-grade or above reading level. Accordingly, adults who have not mastered the basic mechanics of reading and writing find a general lack of services available to them. Many of these are adults who have immigrated from English speaking countries in the Caribbean or Guyana, where they received little schooling. Others are victims of educational failure in the United States. Like the gap in services for the nonliterate ESL student, the lack of resources for the lowest level reader is also accounted for in part by the small number of professionals with an understanding of the linguistic and cognitive tasks involved in the adult's transition from nearly total nonliteracy to fluent reading and writing.

The teacher training program. The teacher training program is an important component of the Linguistic Department's approach to the social needs described above. The Department recruits Hispanic and other students into its undergraduate and graduate programs, and provides them with an excellent general education as well as knowledge specific for helping the ESL/literacy student. All students in the training programs are completely fluent in English and are trained as ESL teachers. The Hispanics receive additional training to provide literacy instruction in Spanish. All students receive training in English literacy instruction with emphasis on the needs of the low-level reader.

The community literacy/ESL program. The community literacy/ESL classes had three main goals: to provide high quality, professional educational services to adults in New York; to become a model program with a national impact; and to provide data and sites for research. Each of these goals is commented on below. This program served about 150 students from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in a total of eight classes. Six of these classes were designed for Spanish speaking, nonliterate adults, and two for nonliterate Anglophone adults.

The original intention for the community program was for it to become a model program by developing, refining and disseminating the curricula for

these classes, emphasizing the cultural and linguistic aspects of each group. Most of the nation's major cities have populations in need of programs of this kind, and it is hoped that the results of these efforts will facilitate the development of other programs to meet their needs. The community program also served as a model by providing training sites for students in the Department; students are able to observe classes, work as tutors, and, when they are advanced in their training to the point of full professional competence, may serve as staff.

The community program provided a convenient means for meeting our research goals because classroom based research ideally should be done with complete control over the instructional program. After one year of operation, however, we came to the conclusion that the administrative burdens of operating an actual literacy program were too great for an academic department, and we transferred it to units of the City University which are dedicated to serving this kind of clientele. We subsequently established a working arrangement with the New York City Board of Education which allowed us to carry our research and curriculum development projects forward.

Institutional support. A key factor during the progress of the community outreach activities described above has been the active interest of the College administration. The administration of Queens College had long sought ways to foster mutually beneficial relations with a variety of community groups, and the Department's activities furthered this interest. There is no doubt that the high degree of institutional support we received was important in improving our chances of acquiring funding and in creating a hospitable environment for the community groups we worked with.

Conclusions. Many factors, involving both the internal organization and external setting of the institution, make our experience unique. There are, however, some features common to our activities and those of any academic department which is contemplating any kind of large-scale program of community involvement. In particular, we commend the following five conclusions for consideration.

1) Although clarity about goals is necessary, it is also important to be flexible. The community plans we undertook had the effect of suddenly plunging us into intense activities within a milieu where we had had little prior experience. We felt a chronic tendency to loose sight of our original goals and to become preoccupied with immediate problems. We managed to survive this period, largely because the advisory committee helped us keep our eye on the goal. However, it also became apparent that

many of our original goals were either unattainable, or had to be modified as a result of our experiences. We found that it was a major challenge to maintain, on the one hand, a sense of purpose, yet on the other to be flexible about changing our purpose.

2) Involve community leaders and students in all phases of planning and execution. It is very important to involve community leaders in all stages of planning and execution of the project. We learned that there exists an expectation in the community that local Colleges and Universities, especially public ones, should play a leadership role in community affairs; accordingly, community involvement is usually very easy to obtain. We involved community leaders in our advisory committee, which had numerous beneficial results. The description above also reveals the crucial and self-starting role played by students. Since they provided the momentum from the beginning, it is clear that they had to be centrally involved in planning every aspect the project.

3) Be sure of internal institutional support. Assuming that the ultimate goal is a program which is to be institutionalized, it is clearly necessary that any obstacles which might stand in the way are clearly anticipated. Furthermore, it is important that the community outreach projects which are anticipated are consonant with the desires of the institutional administration.

4) Carefully identify resources and be ruthlessly self-critical about the danger of over-extension. Since involvement in community outreach projects usually entails a wide range of very intense activities, this is an important caveat.

5) Avoid becoming identified with partisan issues which might divide the community you are trying to work with. Both student groups and external communities are inevitably debating important political questions. For example, we found that there were serious conflicts between the Board of Education and other providers of adult basic education over funding issues, which quickly became transformed into questions of approach. It was our obligation to work with all providers; we wanted to learn as much as we could about practical issues in the classroom, to work out sites for our students, and to make contacts to help the employment prospects of our graduates. Had we become identified as members of any 'camp', we would quickly have lost some of the good will we had worked so hard to achieve.

The description of the community outreach activities of the Queens College Department of Linguistics given above is offered in hopes that linguists in other institutions who are considering community projects may learn something from our experiences.